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ABSTRACT

To determine whether revisions incorporating features of a Time-Life style would improve students' recall of text, a writer and an editor revised two expository passages from a high school history textbook. They added action verbs, created a sense of drama, made explicit transitions, provided background information, and inserted "nuggets"--vivid anecdotes and human details. One hundred eleventh-graders read both original and revised versions of the passages. When students read the revised version of the Korea passage, they recalled 32% more idea units than when they read the original. When reading the revised Vietnam passage, they remembered 39% more idea units than when they read the original version. These findings indicate that the combination of changes did improve students' recall. (Author)

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Using Time-Life Editorial Procedures to Revise Texts[1]

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When my assistant managing editor and I received two excerpts from a high school history textbook (Wade, Wilder, & Wade, 1972), we were aghast. Before us lay some of the driest prose we had ever had the displeasure of reading. Our assignment was to revise these passages in a Time-Life style. But as former Time-Life employees, we knew that only an expensive, time-consuming collaborative effort could ever give them the verve of Time or Life magazine prose.

In order to appreciate the type of effort required, one must first understand what goes on inside Time, Inc. Although I left the position of writer-editor five years ago, I still remember the arduous process of creating an essay in one corner of the company, Time-Life Books. Let us take, for instance, the evolution of an historical essay, an essay for the World War II series.

A World War II writer generally received essay assignments during a "showing"--a session where the series staff and top-level editors scrutinized picture layouts on subjects ranging from the escapades of GIs in Churchill's Britain to the tribulations of Jews in Hitler's Germany. Each ten to sixteen-page layout included a large textblock of 38 x 56 characters and usually one or more small blocks, plus captions. After hearing a researcher's description of the pictures, the writer would inherit a set of layouts and, if he was lucky, a research file on the subject of the essay.

Research is the wellspring of Time-Life style. It is so crucial that a writer usually did his own fact-finding, using the researcher's folder only as a starting point. Even though the assigned essay might amount to just 375 words, he could spend an entire business week gathering and skimming books and magazines. What was he looking for? Probably, the researcher's file and the first three books he laid hands on provided the requisite facts--what happened to whom, when, where, and why. But he was searching for something else. When I was a writer-trainee, a seasoned series editor explained it to me this way: "Write what you'd go home and tell your husband about." Would I rush home to tell my husband that thousands of Russian civilians died during the 900-day siege of Leningrad? Certainly not. But what about this excerpt from my Time-Life essay on the Leningraders' ordeal?:

> Some Leningraders dissolved cattle-horn clothes buttons to make soup; some chewed boiled leather, or made pancakes of sawdust and powdered wallpaper paste; others ate tree bark. A Soviet admiral gave his pigskin briefcase to a friend's wife. "In a few days," he recalled, "I received a box containing a small piece of fairly eatable 'pork aspic.'" The woman sent along the metal parts of the briefcase to reassure him that they had not gone into the aspic--and that she had not lost her sense of humor.

This is a collection of "nuggets," vivid anecdotes and details that remind us that PEOPLE, not events, make history. A Time-Life story is not so much a sequence of events as a

string of nuggets. The historical chronology serves only as the thread that binds these nuggets into a coherent story. To locate such nuggets, a writer had to sift through the facts of dozens of history texts, military documents, diaries and memoirs, searching for a glint of personal tragedy, comedy, or irony. When the "pickings were slim," he sometimes dispatched a cable in the hopes that a foreign correspondent could interview an eyewitness or dig up a colorful foreign-language source.

Only after the writer had amassed enough nuggets could the actual writing begin. There were no official manuals on Time-Life prose style; editors simply commanded a new writer to read Time, Inc. publications, as if he could somehow absorb the sentence patterns and word choice through osmosis. Besides the publications, trial and error proved to be the best teachers. Unacceptable essays came "bouncing" from the series editor's office back to the writer's desk, or they were so heavily edited that the writer could no longer recognize his own work.

The series editor was, in a sense, a consumer advocate, protecting subscribers from boring, awkward, and mystifying writing. My World War II editor was a case in point. When I submitted an early version of the Leningrad essay, I wrote that the hungry Leningraders had boiled leather and made soup out of buttons. "What kinds of buttons could possibly have nutritional value?" he queried. "And did the Leningraders eat the leather or simply chew it?" As for the language of the essays, my series editor made sure that tanks "rumbled"

across squares, that the German campaign "reeled" under the Russian winter, and that soldiers "pushed" through streets "choked with rubble," breathing "air chalky with plaster dust and redolent of death." But even prose that survived the series editor's lead pencil could undergo a metamorphosis beneath the blue pencils of the assistant managing editor and editor-in-chief.

One might assume that the edited essay was now ready to be set in type. Not so. Having traveled up the ladder of editors, the essay reappeared in the writer's office...along with a researcher. While the editors wrestled with the prose, a researcher also struggled to check the accumulating drafts against the fattened research file. Placing red checkmarks over each word in the essay, a researcher--with the help of a high-priced consultant--attempted to verify the accuracy of each draft, hounding the writer if need be. As the writer attempted to reconcile differences with the researcher, he also tried to assuage a copyreader. The copyreader, who had to make the essay fit the layout dimensions, ordered the writer to "green" his copy, that is, to add and cut words with a green pencil. Even if the essay escaped these two vigilantes, he had to pray once more for its safe passage through the ranks of editors, who might at any moment send the essay "bouncing" back.

Clearly, we did not possess the time, expertise, or resources to cast the textbook samples in a Time-Life mold. Our knowledge of the Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese conflicts was so limited that we could not make major

revisions, revisions that would have demanded the kind of in-depth research for which we had little time. To complicate matters, the experimental design imposed additional constraints. We had no conception of the larger context--the history textbook or chapter from which these passages had been excerpted. What had the reader already learned from the textbook? What did he still need to know? We could only grope for answers. Comparability also concerned us. Like so many manuscripts commissioned by Time-Life, these passages would have become mere references in an editor's office: No Time-Life editor would have revised such woefully inadequate texts; he would have written the history of the Korea and Vietnam eras from scratch. But would such a "rewrite" have produced experimental samples of comparable length and focus? We doubt it.

Nevertheless, we attempted to revise the passages. Our research question was as follows: Will revisions incorporating some features of a Time-Life style improve students' recall?

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were one hundred eleventh-graders in a suburban Maryland high school. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four orders of passages. According to school officials, 91% of the students

were middle class and 8% lower class. Officials further indicated that 93% of the students were white and that 9% of them qualified for a free or reduced price lunch.

Materials

The materials for the study consisted of the original textbook passages, revised versions of the passages, and directions for reading the passages.

Original Passages. Two passages of expository text taken from a senior high school history text entitled A History of the United States (Wade, Wilder, & Wade, 1972) were used in the study. The first passage was called "The Cold War Continues Under President Eisenhower" (hereafter known as the Korea passage), was 432 words long, and contained 135 scoreable idea units. The second was entitled "Communists Threaten South Vietnam" (hereafter called the Vietnam passage), was 417 words long, and contained 127 scoreable idea units.

The passages were parsed into idea units using a modified Meyer (1975,1981) prose analysis system. Two graduate students independently analyzed each passage, achieving a high degree of initial agreement: 81% for the Korea passage and 89% for the Vietnam passage. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Revised Versions of the Passages. In each of the two original passages, we identified problematic text features and revised the text to modify or eliminate them. Pinpointing the problems sometimes took the form of a thinking-aloud process (Beck, McKeown, Omanson, & Pople,

1984; Ericsson & Simon, 1980) in which we worked to understand what was driving the revisions.

Since my role was that of the writer, I began the revision process, experimenting first with the language of the passages. To intensify the action, I replaced weaK verbs such as "tried to get," "moved," "fight," and "increased" with words such as "tried to lure," "hustled," "grapple with," and "sKyrocKeted." I added metaphors, changing, for instance, "The Vietnam War Is Escalated" to "The Vietnam Bomb Explodes." Colloquialisms such as "a go-ahead for an invasion" made my version more conversational than the original. Above all, I sought to build a sense of drama. Consider "Though the Chinese Communists periodically bombarded Quemoy and Matsu, they did not risK an invasion of the offshore islands." This sentence became "Though the Communists did not dare to invade Quemoy or Matsu, their periodic air raids on the islands continually reminded the U.S. that Red China was indeed a force to be recKoned with."

However, tinKering with the language did not give the passages a Time-Life quality: They were still too panoramic, too impersonal. In the words of my assistant managing editor:

> ...the facts included in these samples resist interesting presentation, cannot stimulate readers to learn more, and fail to inform adequately about the events of the respective periods. They are too vague about things that are interesting and significant, and too specific about details that no one will remember or care about.

To enrich the content, I inserted nuggets gleaned from library sources, facts about the "cold war" over seating arrangements, the Chinese Nationalists' disillusionment, the Viet Cong's ingenious traps, the perilous Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the daily air strikes. I also incorporated choice words from Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. After all, why should the textbook quote Kennedy's statement that South Vietnam was of "vital interest" to the U.S. when he so graphically called the country "the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike"?

Having made these alterations, I consulted my assistant managing editor. Although he said that my version was "a tremendous improvement over the originals," he suggested many more changes. He questioned the accuracy of some statements: Did Chiang Kai-shek's government deserve to be called "democratic"? Why would the Viet Cong hang artillery shells from tree branches? Did Americans really "swarm" to the polls in 1952? In addition, my editor unified the passages with transitions and clarified references to important figures in the Korean and Taiwanese dramas by supplying background information found earlier in the textbook. Above all, he urged me to expand the anecdote about the Korean peace talks. In a letter he explained:

> It brings home to the reader the unexpected, subtle difficulties in East-West relationships. The story will fascinate students and make them remember the grimy details of who fought whom when and where and why...."Nuggets" are good but insufficient; an interesting text needs fully developed anecdotes, and this one is ideal.

The revised passages were parsed into idea units according to the same prose analysis system used for the textbook passages. Again, two graduate students independently analyzed each passage. The percentage of initial agreement between the raters was 94% for the Korea passage and 88% for the Vietnam passage. The two raters resolved disagreements through discussion.

Comparison of Revised and Textbook Versions. The revisions increased the number of words in the Korea passage from 432 words to 735 and the number of idea units from 135 to 260. They increased the number of words in the Vietnam passage from 417 to 446 and the number of idea units from 127 to 181.

Directions for Reading the Passages and Writing the Recall Protocols. The directions described the purpose of the experiment and informed subjects that they would be reading a passage, writing a recall protocol, reading a second passage, and writing another protocol. The same directions were used at the second testing session for the remaining two passages.

Experimental Packet. The packet included a cover sheet with the directions typed on it, a passage, three sheets of lined paper, a second passage, and three more sheets of lined paper. The same packet format was used for the second testing session.

Procedures

Students participated in the experiment during their

normal classroom periods. Late passes were provided for those students who needed more time. Each student received one packet of materials and was told to read the directions silently while the experimenter read them aloud. Then students were invited to ask questions. After all questions had been answered, the students were instructed to begin. When the students finished, they raised their hand, and the experimenter collected the packet and gave them a crossword puzzle to complete so that others would not be distracted. The same procedures were used seven days later for the second testing session.

Design and Analysis

The study employed a within subjects design with two trial factors. The first trial factor was passage (Korea, Vietnam), and the second was version (original, revised). Passage order was counterbalanced across subjects.

The dependent measure was a written recall protocol. The analysis of variance and Newman-Keuls procedures were used to analyze the results.

Scoring

The written recall protocols were analyzed for the number of idea units remembered. Two raters, neither of them the experimenter, scored the protocols. Each rater scored two hundred randomly assigned protocols independently. Protocols based on the original passages were scored against the original passage propositional grids, whereas protocols based on the revised passages were scored against the revised passage propositional grids. In addition, the two raters

scored twenty randomly assigned protocols in common in order to provide an estimate of interrater reliability. The Pearson Product-Moment correlation between raters was .92.

The procedures for counting idea units were those described by Meyer (1975,1981) but modified for the present study. Specifically, each of the passages was divided into content propositions. Semantic role relationships, rhetorical relationships, and hierarchical levels were not included.

Each subject received one point for recalling an idea unit if the written protocol contained a verbatim or a recognizable paraphrase of content words in the appropriate semantic context.

Results

Analysis of the Written Recall Protocols

The written recall protocols were analyzed by totaling the number of idea units recalled for each passage and by converting the totals to percentages. It was necessary to convert the totals to percentages because the number of idea units differed across passages.

Percentage of Idea Units Recalled. In order to analyze the effects of passage and version as measured by the percentage of idea units recalled, an analysis of variance was run. The ANOVA indicated that there was a reliable effect for passage, F (1,99) = 19.00, $p<.001$ and for version, F (1,99) = 175.18, $p<.001$. Means and standard deviations for the original and revised passages are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

As can be seen, subjects recalled more propositions when reading the revised versions of the passages than when reading the original passages.

Additionally, there was a reliable passage by version interaction, F (1,99) = 3.81, $p<.05$. The Newman-Keuls test indicated that all pairwise comparisons were reliable at $p<.01$ except the comparison between the Korea original passage and the Vietnam original passage, which was not reliable.

Re-analysis of the Revised Passage Recall Protocols Using the Original Passage Propositional Grids

In order to provide a more conservative estimate of the recall data derived from the revised passages, the revised passage recall protocols of 25 randomly selected subjects were re-scored using the original passage propositional grids. Scoring methods and procedures were the same as those delineated earlier in this study.

Percentage of Idea Units Recalled. Again, in order to analyze the effects of passage and version as measured by the percentage of idea units recalled, an analysis of variance was run. The ANOVA indicated that there was a reliable effect for passage, F (1,24) = 35.77, $p<.001$ and for version,

F (1,24) = 18.16, $p<.001$. Means and standard deviations for the re-scored revised passage protocols are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, the re-scoring increased both revised passage scores by approximately two percent.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Additionally, there was a reliable passage by version interaction, F (1,24) = 16.90, $p<.001$. The Newman-Keuls test indicated that all pairwise comparisons were reliable at $p<.01$.

Discussion

The study produced some interesting results. Here, I will first discuss those results, determining the extent to which they answer the question posed in the introduction. Then, I will consider the implications of the study.

In regard to the question "Will revisions incorporating some features of a Time-Life style improve students' recall?" the answer is yes. Results on the recall measure indicate that when students read the revised passages, they recalled more information than when reading the original versions.

To better illustrate gains, I have computed gain scores, using the original versions of the passages as baselines. When students read the revised version of the Korea passage,

they recalled 32% more idea units than when they read the original. When reading the revised Vietnam passage, they remembered 39% more idea units than when they read the original version. These gain scores are comparable to those in an earlier study (Redd-Boyd, 1984) in which students who read the first revision of the Korea and Vietnam passages recalled 33% and 48% more idea units respectively than when they read the original versions of the passages. The difference in the results of the two studies may reflect the differences in the subjects used for each study. The school used for the first study was a college preparatory high school, whereas the school used for the second study was classified as a comprehensive high school. It is obvious from the scores from both studies that the revisions markedly improved students' comprehension.

Why did students recall more information from the revised passages? This is a complicated question since the revisions included a variety of changes in content, organization, and language. Although preliminary analyses suggest that most students remembered the nuggets that were inserted in the revisions, at this point I must attribute the recall gains to a combination of changes: incorporating nuggets, providing background information, making explicit transitions, creating a sense of drama, and adding action verbs. Further analysis of the protocols is needed to address this question more fully.

In view of these findings, am I recommending that textbook writers use only nuggets or other features that

might be considered sensational to make text more readable? No. I fully realize that there are aspects of academic prose that do not lend themselves to these sorts of revisions. However, the academic nature of the text is not the major problem. Perhaps Rudolf Flesch (1946) puts his finger on the problem in his classic book The Art of Plain Talk. The trouble with textbooks, he observes, is that

> textbooks are written for teachers, not for students. The textbook writer is the only writer in the world who doesn't have to worry about his readers; as long as his book pleases the teachers, it will be "required reading".... So, naturally, the textbook writer doesn't care a bit whether his book will be pleasant to read or interesting or well written; he knows that this isn't what teachers care about most. Teachers look first for other things in a textbook: whether it is well organized for teaching, whether it has good exercises, whether it has a lot of information--in other words, whether it will be a help in teaching, a laborsaving device. (pp. 148-49)

Of course, some history textbook writers do care about their student readers but hesitate to use colorful language and anecdotes because they are trying to maintain objectivity and stick to a chronology of important dates and events. Even so, Bonamy Dobrée (1934), a noted British critic, rejects their approach in his analysis of modern prose styles. "We do not ask for our historians to be dictaphones," he writes. "We demand that they should be men, for unless they colour history for us with their own personalities, we shall not read them, however regrettable this may seem" (p. 146). What I am suggesting, then, to history book writers is what my assistant managing editor said so well: "Readability is not gained only by

technique...readability is gained by interesting material." Why can't history be interesting?

To conclude, it is important to emphasize that the gains obtained in this study were generated by revisions that fall far short of Time-Life's publication standards. Given the present findings and the findings from the previous study, we intend to pursue this line of inquiry.

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Table 1

Percentage of Idea Units Recalled and Standard Deviations for the Original and Revised Passages

Passage	Version	M	SD
Korea	Original	26.26%	16.86%
	Revised	34.86%	14.55%
Vietnam	Original	27.65%	16.85%
	Revised	38.42%	17.25%

(n = 100)

Table 2

Percentage of Idea Units Recalled and Standard Deviations for the Re-scored Revised Passage Recall Protocols

Passage	Version	*M*	*SD*
Korea	Revised	36.66%	16.15%
Vietnam	Revised	40.18%	18.32%

(*n* = 25)